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TRIBUNE

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Devastated Laos

The State Department is trying to knock down claims by Representative Paul N. McCloskey (Rep., Calif.) that United States bombing has destroyed "thousands of villages" in Laos and turned 700,000 Laotians into refugees — but it has to admit a considerable part of his charges. The 700,000, the State Department maintains, is the total of all who have been or are refugees, and only 266,362 are refugees now.

As for villages, McCloskey interviewed 16 separate groups of refugees who told him every house in their village had been destroyed by American air power. His "thousands" is simply a guess, from the fact that Laos had 9,400 villages to start with. The Air Force won't show him the photographs it says show that the villages McCloskey said were destroyed still exist.

Senator Edward Kennedy (Dem., Mass.) had his subcommittee staff studying the question some weeks ago. The staff estimated that civilian casualties in Laos were running about 30,000 a year, including 10,000 dead, mostly as a result of American bombing.

The New York Times reported in mid-March on the Meo tribe of the Laotian highlands, the warlike group which the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency organized into a clandestine army to fight the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in Laos. This tribe is now nearing the end of its mountains and the limits of its strength. The tribe has had to abandon hill settlement after hill settlement and has suffered dreadful casualties to fighting men (who begin at age 12 and 13) and civilians. Most of their tribal homelands are lost or destroyed.

The Meos and the other highland tribes have done most of the fighting on both sides in Laos. The ethnic Laos dislike fighting, and often shoot in the air and advance or retreat (mostly retreat) on the basis of the answering noise. They take seriously the Buddhist law, "Thou shalt not kill."

Yet the Americans and the Vietnamese, North and South, have ruthlessly extended their war to their gentle land, and the Americans with their tremendous fire power have been the most destructive.

The 1949 Geneva Convention on protection of civilians in time of war forbids infliction of suffering, brutality, collective penalties, pillage and reprisals against persons and property. It bans devastation "as an end in itself or as a separate measure of war," as distinct from devastation incidental to a battle between armed forces.

The American way of war in the air all too often breaks these international laws of war. Congress has banned use of American ground forces in Laos. This ban is evaded by the CIA on a small scale.